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An Interview

with

MRS. REBECCA FAUNTLEROY BENOIST

August 26, 1981

Interviewed by

Graham Hicks

HICKS: This is August 26, 1981, and I am here with Mrs. Rebecca Fauntleroy Benoist, who is affectionately known to us as "Bec." With your permission, I will call you "Bec."

BENOIST: Please do.

HICKS: Bec, what is your first recollection of any talk about a Pilgrimage?

BENOIST: The first thing I remember was around 1932. The ladies got very excited about having a Garden Club. Mrs. Balfour Miller and Mrs. Ballew came to me and wanted to know if I would be President if they organized a Garden Club. I said, "Oh, yes, I'll be glad to, Katherine, if you will be vice-president. She said she would and would be glad to help me in any way. So with that, we set a date for a meeting. Then we had a meeting, and the first thing we did was start planning our spring tour.

HICKS: Was that a tour of the gardens or a tour of the homes?

BENOIST: A tour of the houses. You are probably thinking about the year we planned a tour of gardens for the State Garden Clubs. We had had a terribly cold winter and didn't have any flowers. So someone said, "Oh, well, let's take them into the houses." So we invited them into the homes. And I'll never forget--they had the headquarters at the old Eola Hotel. They had the registration there. People started coming. We had a certain number of cars down there to take our guests around. They were guests because they weren't paying then. We were so excited that we didn't know what to do--to see so many people interested in it. Everybody thought it was just wonderful to go into the homes. I think they forgot about the gardens. So after that we thought it would be a wonderful thing to do every year--and charge to take them into the homes.

HICKS: Was the thought then among the ladies of a future commercial operation as we have now or was it community pride?

BENOIST: Community pride. The proceeds were to go to the Park and the Bluff and things like that, not into the homes.

HICKS: Do you remember, during the first Pilgrimage, when we had a parade in the afternoon and a ball that night?

BENOIST: Yes, I do. But we had that only one year. I was on the entertainment committee that year, but I didn't take part in any of it. Of course, you know who the King and Queen were that year-- Hartman Moritz and Carolyn Davis Eidt. And the daytime King and Queen were Elise Brown and Bill Adams.

HICKS: Who else do you remember being associated with you as officers that first year, besides Katherine Miller?

BENOIST: We had as secretary, Mrs. Hicks Parker and as treasurer, Mrs. J. B. Kellogg. I'm reading from the first yearbook that we had in 1932. The Publicity Committee was Mrs. Sam Geisenberger and Mrs. L. M. Butts. The Program Committee was Mrs. G. H. Brandon, Mrs. Glenn Holloway, and Mrs. Ferriday Byrnes. The Committee for the Supervision of the Bluffs was Mrs. Howard Pritchardt, Mrs. Frank Fauntleroy, and Mrs. Annie Murphy. Then the Executive Board consisted of Mrs. George Marshall, Mrs. W. B. Mangham, Mrs. Eugene Enochs, Mrs. William Kendall, Mrs. G. H. Brandon, Mrs. L. M. Butts, Mrs. Lee Ratcliff, Mrs. M. R. Beltzhoover, Mrs. John R. Junkin, Mrs. Hyde Jenkins, Mrs. S. H. Lambdin, Mrs. William Adams, and Mrs. J. S. Ullman. Quoting from yearbook: "The most outstanding work of the Natchez Garden Club for the year 1932 was the "Garden Pilgrimage Week," March 28 to April 2, inclusive."

BENOIST cont.: "The Garden Club will sponsor 'Garden Pilgrimage Week' March 28 to April 2 and will conduct pilgrimages to the old historic homes of Natchez for a fee of \$2.00 per person. The proceeds derived will go toward the beautification of some of our public parks. We hope this will be the beginning of an annual festival and will be an inspiration to us all to make Natchez more beautiful."

HICKS: Bec, where were the tableaux held in the early days?

BENOIST: The first ball was held at the Institute Hall, the old Fisk Library building. It was very small up there, and Emma Marks was the chairman, and she fixed bleachers around and painted them green, so it would look like a terrace. Of course, when they came down to dance, it was very pretty. Of course we had a huge crowd, and we couldn't have everybody seated at one time. So we would have a second performance. Finally, we decided we would go to the Baker Grand Theater. I don't remember what year that was, but when we left the Baker Grand we went to the Auditorium.

HICKS: Do you remember any help gotten from the Board of Aldermen, the Board of Supervisors, or other public bodies?

BENOIST: Yes. We had to have policemen direct traffic, and they were very nice about helping that way.

HICKS: Did they put any money toward helping in the first Pilgrimages?

BENOIST: No, I don't think so. It was just a Garden Club project. And you know we've always paid rent for the Auditorium.

HICKS: Now, your middle name is Fauntleroy. Do you have any connection with the Fauntleroy's at Linden?

BENOIST: Yes. My brother, Frank, married Margaret Trimble. She was a Feltus. They lived at Linden.

HICKS: There was another house connected with you in the early days called "Propinquity" out at Washington.

BENOIST: My old aunt lived at Propinquity, Mrs. Rebecca Miller. I had lived there at one time and had gone to Jefferson College as a day pupil---had horse and buggy and had driven over there as a day pupil. Of course this was a long time ago. The Natchez Garden Club were the ones who invited Auntie. They wanted more houses on their tour during Pilgrimage. So they asked Auntie to put Propinquity on. Mrs. W. A. Adams and Mrs. Metcalfe and Mrs. Kellogg were the ones who asked her. They said they would help her. Of course you know I was going to help her, too. So she put the house on. It was really something, because there was only a gravel road out there then. There was no good highway. I would have to go one day and help Auntie get ready. Then go back the next day to help her receive guests.

Of course I had little children. And I had Jack, who was in the tableaux. He was just furious. The Ball Committee said he would have to wear a pink velvet suit and lace collar. Jack was five years old. His daddy backed him up. He said he didn't want his son wearing a pink suit. But I talked him into it. Little Ann Kendall was the little girl page. The King and Queen were Jane Marx Wexler and Francis Geddes. Well, at that time the old court would come in and meet the new court. So Jack had to wear the Pink suit again. But he was a year older. Jack said, "I'm not going to do that again this year." I told him he would only have to wear it one time that year. But he wouldn't. So I knew Russie Butts had Hansel, who was a year younger and could probably wear the pink suit, so Mrs. Butts talked Hansel into doing it. So Hansel

BENOIST cont.: was the little page the second year, with Ann Kendall.

HICKS: Did you have any connection with the Pilgrimage at Linden?

BENOIST: Well, I would go out to help Margaret receive when she was on. You see, Margaret Fauntleroy was my sister-in-law. I would help any way I could...fix flowers and things like that.

HICKS: That was a pretty big job, helping at two houses, with little children at home.

BENOIST: Of course that first year I had two children at home. Carolyn wasn't born until 1933.

HICKS: I know you have been at the tableaux every time I've been there. In what capacity?

BENOIST: Well, I was chairman several times. And I've always been on the Ball Committee.

HICKS: Tell us something about the ballet in the early Pilgrimages.

BENOIST: Miss Treebe Poole was teaching the ballet. She had it for many, many years. When we had a ball meeting, we would always have to tell her what the color the court dresses would be so she could select her color for the ballet. She was very particular about what color she had. In after years, Martha Hootsell had the same ballet, but she called her tableau "Audubon."

HICKS: My memory of Miss Treebe Poole stems from my memories of what was then called M.S.C.W. Was that before or after she was here?

BENOIST: No, that was another Miss Poole altogether. It was real strange. Martha Hootsell had gotten all her training from Miss Treebe Poole here in Natchez. Miss Treebe was born in Natchez and had never gone to M.S.C.W. to teach. Then, when Martha went up there, the teacher up there was Miss Ode Poole. They were no kin and didn't even know each other.

HICKS: I'm glad you have straightened me out. Can you remember any humorous incidents that happened in the tableaux?

BENOIST: Yes. You know we had "The Hunt" tableau with the dogs. Well, the dogs would get real excited and have "accidents." The ladies would have to rush out with the broom and the pan because the next tableau was the ballet. So they had to get all of that out of the way.

HICKS: I suppose all that was sort of interesting to the guests.

BENOIST: Oh, yes. They would clap and whistle. They thought it was very funny.

HICKS: Do you remember anything about the early dogs they had?

BENOIST: No, but the dogs got sadder-looking as the years went on.

HICKS: Fox hunting and coon hunting sort of lost their place as a sport around here, and people didn't keep fine dogs as they did in the early days. Now let's talk a little more about Propinquity. What do you know about the early days of that house?

BENOIST: It was owned by General Covington. He was in charge of Fort Dearborne, which was across the road. His family lived at Propinquity. Of course he named the house "Propinquity" because that is the French word for "nearness," because he was near his family. After that, my great grandfather, Dr. John Branch, and his wife bought it. It was located near the old settlement of Washington. It was right on the Natchez Trace. The Natchez Trace ran right in front of it. There was a little walkway right down to the Trace--the same little lane that is there now. My aunt said her mother told her people would come by in horse and buggy and stop to get water. There was no place then to stop to get water. (Of course Jack doesn't want the Natchez Trace officials to know about that!)

HICKS: From that time until now, has Propinquity stayed in your family?

BENOIST: Yes, it has. There were three sons and two daughters in that family. They all died except my mother. She was living when Propinquity was on tour. Auntie was living there, too. Auntie died first, so it was left to Mother. After Mother died, we gave it to my son, Jack.

HICKS: Jack is living there now, isn't he? That's the little boy who was allergic to the pink suit? What type house is it?

BENOIST: Well, it has two rooms on either side of a big hall that runs through the center. There is a big gallery on the back. The staircase was on the back gallery, but now they have moved the back staircase inside the house. I think there are four rooms upstairs, too.

HICKS: In the early days you had to go outside to go upstairs?

BENOIST: Yes. You know so many of the houses had the staircase outside. It had something to do with the insurance. Why, I don't know. But I know at Alma Kellogg's house, The Elms, the staircase was on the back gallery.

HICKS: Do you remember any incidents at Propinquity that might be interesting or humorous?

BENOIST: Well, Henry Ford came to Natchez, but he never got to Propinquity, because we didn't have enough people directing traffic. Cars were stacked up all the way from Washington to Propinquity. Of course we had a little narrow lane, and they couldn't let him in there. I think he had to catch a train to get back. So he never got to Propinquity.

HICKS: At one time we had Mrs. Roosevelt in Natchez. She didn't get out there, did she?

BENOIST: No, she didn't. You know while she was in Natchez she got stuck in the tub while taking a bath! (Laughter.)

HICKS: Now where was this?

BENOIST: I don't know whose house she was in, but that was the story they told. I think it was in the hotel. She was on her way to Baton Rouge. She stopped by to see us. Dave Garraway also came here--not too long ago. He sponsored a program out at Melrose.

HICKS: We had a little disagreement between the Garden Clubs sometimes back. What do you remember about that?

BENOIST: I don't discuss it because my husband told me to stay out of it! A lot of people lost friends, but I didn't.

HICKS: They just had a little disagreement about how things should be handled and split in two. Don't you think most of the scars have disappeared?

BENOIST: I know they have.

HICKS: The Benoist family is quite prominent here and has a long history in this town. What other members of your family have been members of "Royalty"?

BENOIST: Well, Eugene was King. He was my nephew and was King with Patsy Junkin Armstrong as Queen. My daughter Caroline was Queen. At one time the Natchez Garden Club would have a Queen and the Pilgrimage Garden Club would have the King one year. Then they would swap it around. So Caroline was Queen for the Pilgrimage Garden Club, and Caddie Meng was King for the Natchez Garden Club.

HICKS: I bet you had a lot of little ones as Pages.

BENOIST: All three of my children were Pages. Andree' was Page with Howard Pritchartt, Jack was Page with Ann Kendall, and my Caroline was Page

BENOIST cont.: with Malcolm Wood.

HICKS: Can you think of any other interesting or unusual things that happened during Pilgrimages?

BENOIST: Well, you know Ann Metcalfe and Bazile Lanneau were King and Queen together. They fell in love and got married.

HICKS: I think we had another revered and grand old citizen here, Dr. Edwin Benoist. What part did Dr. Edwin have in these early times?

BENOIST: He just loved to take pictures. He had a movie camera. He would go down to the tableaux and take pictures of the children dancing and the court. He also went into the homes and took pictures of the hostesses in the homes. He was the one who took the picture of Bud Scott that was on the stand the day they had the daytime parade.

HICKS: What further things do you remember about Bud Scott?

BENOIST: Oh, I remember many things about him. He could play the best waltzes. We then had White's Restaurant on Main Street, and you could go on Sunday afternoon. He would play the whole time. It was the place to go.

HICKS: His band was based in Natchez, but he played in Fayette in my time. Was the Pilgrimage as successful as the founding ladies thought it would be?

BENOIST: Oh, yes. I think so. I think they recognized the fact that it was going to be very successful. And it was.

End of Interview

Transcribed by Peggy Forman

Typed by Phebe Winters